



**Housing for Ford workers in Gronauer Street**  
Walter Dick, Cologne, 1962. Source: [www.bilderbuch-koeln.de](http://www.bilderbuch-koeln.de)

# **türme der gastarbeiter: the representation of postwar housing and the migrant inhabitants in photography**

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*Focusing on the city of Cologne and its postwar history, this paper investigates the contradicting forms of the production, use, and circulation of photography that are employed in representing the new image of the modern city and of the migrant-dweller. The photographic exclusion of migrant inhabitants from the official documentary photographs of the new towers built as workers' housing contradicts the fact that those towers were defined as urban landmarks to represent the new image of Cologne and their color and black & white photographs were widely publicized. A comparison of two photography genres –documentary and mise en scène– in the analysis reveals how the framing of architectural photographs of the housing estates and the self-images staged by migrant workers in public space generated simultaneous yet disengaged narratives in architecture and photography.*

**keywords** Photography, Postwar workers' housing, Migration, Self-images

## introduction

From the 1950s on, the housing agency GAG (*Gemeinnützige Aktiengesellschaft für Wohnungsbau*) constructed several new housing estates in the outskirts of Cologne using various building typologies. While low-rise, multi-family terraced housing blocks were designed for households with children, all free-standing multi-story towers served as workers' dormitories for single male migrants who were employed by the large industrial companies such as Ford and Bayer. The architects of the so-called '*Türme der Gastarbeiter*' (towers of guest workers) envisioned workers' housing as visual landmarks of the postwar city that should give a new "urban emphasis" to the existing cityscape – a vision-oriented approach in urban design and planning that followed a new discourse on the "imageability" of the city introduced by Kevin Lynch.

Color photography of workers' housing embodied both the architects' urban vision and their contribution to the 1960s economic prosperity in Germany. Yet, the photographers of the GAG never depicted the migrant inhabitants as their *sujet* in their photographs, but only the women and children. The photographic exclusion of migrants from the official documentary photographs of housing estates caused both social and visual segregation of migrant workers in public sphere and perpetuated an exclusive success story of postwar housing that is written without any consideration of the migrant workers' inhabitation and their spatial experience of those schemes.

In some snapshots made by the migrants themselves, however, the towers and their inhabitants appear together in one frame. In this paper, I juxtapose anonymous snapshots of migrants posing in front of the high-rise blocks with the official documentary photographs produced by the GAG in order to complicate the historical narratives. For instance, some inhabitants of the workers' dormitories proudly posed in front of the towers identifying themselves with the modern "image" of the towers. Such self-images set up in a visual *mise en scène* and then sent back to families at home made those believe in the well-being of the worker. Yet, these images also served to conceal the real living conditions. If compared to the official architectural photographs of the interiors devoid of workers, the personal snapshots of migrant inhabitants reveal their experiences of living in workers' dormitories and the qualities of efficiently designed space that are modified by inhabitants into lived-in space through improvised occupancy, appropriation, and placemaking.

In this paper, which is based on the archival study of workers' housing and interviews made with amateur and professional photographers who depict migrant workers as their subjects in Cologne, I compare the architectural photography of the high-rise workers' dormitories with the personal snapshots of migrant workers who used modern architecture as well as the new image of the city to construct their new identity as city-dwellers. By contrasting the aspirations and techniques of using photography as a means of documentation and *mise en scène*, I seek to shed light onto the dual process of identity construction that involves the creation of new images for cities and their migrant-dwellers under the notions of *Stadtbild* and *Selbstbild*. The simultaneous construction of identities and self-images instigates reflexivity in processes – such as the appropriation of space and the representation of the self and the city – through which I analyze the migrants' active engagement in redefining and reshaping the spaces they inhabit as well as in reconstructing the symbiotic relation between migration and the city.

## making a new image of cologne via high-rise housing

The transition from being a city of ruins into a modern big city was an inevitable trajectory for major German cities developed by urban planners of the postwar period. As the destructions of the war in historical city centers involved the processes of meticulous restoration and rebuilding of historic buildings, the unpopulated lands in the urban fringes enabled the implication of modern planning and design principles.

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In the expansion plans und various urban design schemes prepared by Rudolf Schwarz, the city of Cologne was imagined to recover from the destructions of war emerging as a "new Cologne" that should construct a "new image" as an alternative to the existing silhouette dominated by the towers of the cathedral of Cologne and other churches built within the walls of the historic town dating back to the medieval times<sup>1</sup>.

Whereas the cityscape in the historic town should be restored precisely to rebuild the urban memory of the past, planners looked for new visual landmarks to represent the contemporaneity of German cities and to create a new urban image after the war. The concept of *Hochstadt* and the typology of high-rise residential buildings emerged as a key solution implemented in the planning of new suburban areas. In Cologne, the newly planned towns provided new housing areas and basic public facilities to city-dwellers as an alternative living outside of the city center that was still under recovery and in ruins by the end of the 1950s.

Located on the eastern side of the Rhine River, the districts across the historic town of Cologne were historically used by facilities for industrial production. Due to air pollution and large number of factories and warehouses, the eastern side was not preferred by many to live except the working classes. After the World War II, however, due to the expansion plans of Cologne, the unoccupied areas on this side of the Rhine were developed as new residential towns with modern facilities such as commercial stores, laundry, playgrounds and green areas that attracted the middle classes<sup>2</sup>.

Photography became a means to publicize the new, modern image of the city that ultimately should convince people to live in those newly built areas. From 1960s on, the housing agency GAG prepared several illustrated publications, where the number of color and black & white photographs that varied from air photos of the settlement to the street views of houses exceeded the number of site plans and typical floor plans of housing projects being reproduced<sup>3</sup>. In order to document such newly built housing settlements and the life of the inhabitants for the purposes of publicity, advertising, and archiving, the GAG commissioned contemporaneous photographers who employed a peculiar mixture of techniques that are close to both commercial and architectural photography.

Let me illustrate this point in the booklet that was prepared to publicize Stammheim, one of the new towns located on the eastern side of the Rhine River. In 1962, the rebuilding of a small village began with the construction of Stammheim-North and then continued with Stammheim-South in 1966 and 1967. Featuring a color air photo of Stammheim-North on its cover, the GAG booklet visualized the planning strategies of the city of Cologne– that was to create "a city within a city" by increasing the urban density in the periphery (f2)<sup>4</sup>.



**f2\_Cover of the booklet illustrating the housing estate Stammheim-North**  
1968. Source: Historical Archive of the City of Cologne

This new town was designed as an ensemble of various types of houses –three to four-storey terraced housing, one-storey atrium houses with private gardens, and towers. While the majority of buildings were made of low-rise terraced houses, four towers grouped together and placed close to the edge of the Rhine created the so-called “*Rheinpanorama*” and the new image of Stammheim due to their massive volume and visibility even from a distance. Named as “*Türme der Gastarbeiter*”, these towers were originally designed to accommodate single male workers who arrived from Italy and Turkey to work in the automotive company Ford located across the Rhine. As these men were expected to work on a rotation principle and leave the country after a couple years, the company provided a rental accommodation to them that was for temporary use. Therefore, during the planning phase, the architects designed the initial layout of floor plans with the possibility of modification so that the dorm units would be easily converted into three-room apartments for families in the future<sup>5</sup>.

The architects of the GAG envisioned the workers’ dormitories to function as the new urban landmarks in the peripheral districts of Cologne dominating the new image of the city and, therefore, designed them as eight-storey buildings. The architects’ aim to give a new “urban emphasis”<sup>6</sup> to the existing cityscape in Cologne shaped their design that was also influenced by a new discourse on urban image introduced by Kevin Lynch. In his book *The Image of the City*, Lynch defined “imageability” as the new physical, architectural and sensual quality of the built environment<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, the design tools that are mentioned by Lynch such as color, shape, and arrangement to create and sustain the imageability were all employed in the design of new settlements in the 1960s constructed by the GAG in Cologne including those in Stammheim.

The photographs of these settlements represent the postwar achievements of the GAG and the economic prosperity of Germany in the 1960s. Originally published in a major publication of the GAG in 1963, the documentary photographs continuously appeared in architectural books on the history of housing in Cologne as well as in more recent publications of the GAG<sup>8</sup>. Yet, despite the fact that the towers initially designed as workers’ dormitories have been key elements in defining the new image of the city and its visual representation in photographs, the migrant inhabitants of those towers are never featured in the GAG publications and architectural books. Neither the publicity images nor architectural photographs of new towers illustrated migrants as inhabitants of the towers. The photographers commissioned by the GAG framed most of the towers either devoid of people or in some cases only with women and children walking nearby.

An exception to this rule is a photograph by Walter Dick, a prominent photographer, who extensively documented the city of Cologne and its urban life in the postwar period. In (f1), an everyday scene of inhabitants spending their free time in the gardens is depicted. Yet, the photograph also points out the scarcity and lack of public facilities created for the inhabitants outside of the towers. Indeed, no possibility for sitting existed outside. The social life of migrant workers in the settlement was confined to the spatial and physical boundaries created by architectural schemes. Spatial segregation becomes especially evident in such photographs of the housing estate, where no spatial arrangements were implemented to generate communal life among diverse groups of inhabitants residing in the same estate.

## staging self-images in public space

In the 1960s and 70s, for many guest workers, the only means to communicate with families and friends back at home were photographs and letters. An archival survey of amateur photographs and snapshots taken by migrants reveals that a visual representation of oneself and self-expression in the form of one’s own perception of daily life emerged as a usual practice among migrants while living away from home. Moreover, this practice eased the construction of their identity as new city-dwellers in a relatively strange, unfamiliar city<sup>9</sup>.

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**f3\_A self-image staged with colleagues in Neumarkt**  
Cologne, 1965. Source: DOMID Archive, Cologne

For migrant workers, outings to the city center with friends in their free time included walks, window-shopping, going to movies, drinking, and eating. Such urban practices and experiences were not much different from those one would find in a bourgeois culture of a modern city. When framing themselves in snapshots, these young men always appeared in their best outfits and reflected a moment of contentment, buoyancy, and self-assurance (f3)<sup>10</sup>.

In such self-fabricated images, the main purpose was to create make-believe for the receiver of the photograph who had to be convinced of the well-being of the person featured in the photograph. In opposition to portraits taken in a studio setting, real urban settings increased the aesthetic value and effectiveness of such self-representations. Yet, the ambiguity of photographs persisted even though the migrants represented themselves with a glimpse of urban scenery in one frame and staged their self-images in real public spaces<sup>11</sup>. Especially when staged in public space, self-images created a visual *mise en scène* in which the urban scenery has become an accomplice for the creator to reinforce the reliability of the photograph for the viewers.



**f4\_A postcard of Cologne represents urban sceneries that are familiar to migrant worker**  
1965. Source: [www.bilderbuch-koeln.de](http://www.bilderbuch-koeln.de)

Some postcards produced in Germany yet printed in Turkish depicted the urban sceneries and the modern image of the city of Cologne enabling migrant workers to represent their new city to families and friends at home through their own urban encounters even though this might be stereotypical. On the postcard shown in **f4**, the select sceneries are the Ford company in Niehl, the workers' dormitories in Stammheim-North, the tower of the company Bull in Mülheim, (that is the tallest structure in Cologne built in 1960) and the shuttle boat that operated across the Rhine three times a day to carry the Ford workers commuting from the dormitories in Stammheim to the factory in Niehl and back.

Despite the photographic exclusion of migrant inhabitants from the documentary and architectural photographs of the new towns produced by the GAG housing agency, some inhabitants of the workers' dormitories proudly posed in front of the towers, produced self-images and identified themselves with the modern image of the towers (**f5**). By staging a visual *mise en scène* in public space, the subject/creators of these snapshots first visualized themselves as permanent residents of the housing estate and then reflected this self-image to the receivers of the photograph. Hence, the representative value of snapshots would increase due to the choice of urban scenery and its framing together with the photographic *sujet*, who may decide (in this case the migrant inhabitant) about the production, use and circulation of the image himself. Indeed, the migrants' self-imposed inclusion in personal snapshots does not make these images less ambiguous in comparison to the architectural photographs of the towers devoid of migrant inhabitants (**f6**).

In my ongoing study of the visual representation of migrant workers and their living conditions in cities of postwar Germany, I suggest a critical analysis of the 1960s and 70s modern architecture and especially of spaces of migration through photography. By juxtaposing two genres –the official documentary photographs of the GAG with the personal snapshots of migrants– and analyzing them relationally, I suggest tools to expand the boundaries of the mainstream architectural history by making the visual representation of modernism more inclusive of its users. When placed side by side, for instance, two photographs –a snapshot of an anonymous inhabitant and the architectural photograph of the workers' housing in Stammheim– may regenerate a new discursive space in photography and enable an inclusive self-criticism in 1960s architecture and its visual representation<sup>12</sup>.

A further comparison of interior images of the workers' housing reveals how the photographic visions of the architects differed from those of the migrant inhabitants. The GAG photograph illustrates the hallway and staircase in the ground level of a high-rise workers'



**f5\_A snapshot of a migrant inhabitant taken in front of the towers in Cologne**  
1965. Source: DOMID Archive, Cologne



**f6\_The architectural photograph of the workers' housing in Stammheim-North**  
taken by the photographers of theGAG, 1964. Source: www.bilderbuch-koeln.de



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Foto 60820 [www.bilderbuch-koeln.de](http://www.bilderbuch-koeln.de) (1958)



**f7\_An interior view of the Ford workers' housing in Niehl**

1958. Source: [www.bilderbuch-koeln.de](http://www.bilderbuch-koeln.de)

**f8\_A snapshot of a migrant inhabitant in the dormitory room**

Cologne, 1964. Source: DOMID Archive, Cologne

housing in Niehl. Color scheme applied to the interior design of this dormitory to avoid monotony is visually rationalized by the use of color photography. Yet, because the space is shown devoid of its inhabitants, it appears more sterile, generic and soulless than it might be in reality (f7). In contrast, personal snapshots from interiors deny the architectural functionalism of dormitories. When photographed in a room shared by up to four men, the representative value of the photograph decreases due to the lived-in atmosphere of the dormitories (f8).

Such photographs seem to be made only for private use –that is to say not for a wide public circulation among family and friends. Nevertheless, they convey valuable information about the personality of men who reflected their visions onto their space by hanging a selection of images and objects on the corner walls next to the bed. Among them were the photos of the beloved ones but also the panoramic views of cities and hometowns. Considering the uneasy conditions of living in shared rooms for adult men, interpersonal conflicts, the lack of privacy and social contact to others living in the same estate, these images and objects hung on the walls provided a glimpse of personalized private space to escape the mundane living in the dorms.

### **conclusion: self-criticism of architecture via photography**

In my study of the visual representation of migrant workers and their housing conditions in postwar German cities, I suggest a new transdisciplinary link between photography, architecture, and migration. A comparison of architectural photographs with snapshots and self-images can generate a visual critique of migrant workers' housing as well as a new self-criticism of 1960s architecture and planning. As historical documents, the self-images staged in front of the towers and in the housing estate display an exceptional potential to complicate the narratives of success in the mainstream history of postwar housing that are written without any consideration of the inhabitants and their perception of the lived-in space.



## endnotes

1. For details of the master plan, see Rudolf Schwarz, "Das neue Köln – Ein Vorentwurf", in *Das Neue Köln: Ein Vorentwurf*, ed. by Stadt Köln (Köln: J.P. Bachem, 1950), 3-64 and Hans Schmitt-Rost, "Das neue Bild", in *Das Neue Köln*, 77-81.
2. For a full documentation of the newly developed housing estates in new towns constructed by the GAG, see Hans Schmitt-Rost, ed., *Grossstadt in der Grossstadt: 50 Jahre GAG in Köln* (Köln: GAG, 1963).
3. Ibidem.
4. The following booklet illustrates the the design and planning of the Stammheim-North at length. GAG Immobilien AG, *Unsere kleine Stadt am Rhein* (Köln: Grafische Werkstatt Druckerei, 1968).
5. Schmitt-Rost, *Grossstadt in der Grossstadt*, 45.
6. Ibidem, 46.
7. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: Technology Press, 1960), 9-10.
8. For the GAG publications, see Hans Schmitt-Rost, ed., *Grossstadt in der Grossstadt: 50 Jahre GAG in Köln* (Köln: GAG, 1963) and GAG Immobilien AG, *Grossstadt in der Grossstadt: 100 Jahre GAG in Köln* (Köln: J.P. Bachem, 2013). In the following book written on the history of housing in Cologne, architectural photographs from the GAG Archive are reproduced. Werner Heinen, and Anne-Marie Pfeffer, *Köln: Siedlungen 1938-1988* (Köln: J.P. Bachem, 1988).
9. See Ela Kaçel, "Framing Migrants as City-dwellers: Identity, Space, and Photography", in *Migration, Stadt und Urbanität. Perspektiven auf die Heterogenität migrantischer Lebenswelten*, ed Thomas Geisen et al. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS Verlag, 2016), 403-421.
10. For a selection of archival photographs, see DOMID, *40 Jahre Fremde Heimat: Einwanderung aus der Türkei in Köln* (Köln: DOMID, 2001).
11. John Berger, *Another Way of Telling*. Photos by Jean Mohr (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982.) Earlier again with the photographer Jean Mohr, John Berger wrote a phenomenal photo-essay on the politics and culture of guest workers in postwar Western Europe. John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man: migrant workers in Europe* (New York: Viking Press, 1975). For an analysis of *A Seventh Man*, see Kaçel, "Framing Migrants as City-dwellers", 405-409.
12. I use here discursive space in a similar sense of the term proposed by Krauss in Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View", *Art Journal* 4 (1982): 311-319.

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